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ABSTRACT

The following effective teaching practices identified by recent educational research are discussed: (1) carefully structured, sequenced, and paced instruction; (2) good classroom management; and (3) careful plans and decisions about goals, content, materials, and activities of instruction by teachers.
Well-articulated instructional practices and curriculum in every classroom in the school, an overlap between content of instruction and content of tests used to assess student performance, and active instructional leadership by the building principal are discussed as factors in good instructional management. According to research evidence presented, effectiveness in schools also depends upon shared values, norms, and relationships among staff and students. Strong support from the superintendent, district office, and parents is also discussed as an additional factor for effective schools. The need for careful judgment of the findings is pointed out, and consideration of the limitations as well as the strengths in the research is advised. Four limitations are listed. (EM)

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Effective Schools: What Research Tells Us

by Michael Cohen, team leader, Effective Schools Team, National Institute of Education.

The rich knowledge base for improving schools now being built through recent school effectiveness research covers a wide range of areas. We are learning what works for instructional practices, classroom management and organization, teacher planning and decision making, teacher and school change, staff development practices and school organization and climate.

This large collection of research findings holds great promise for the improvement of the nation's schools. If state and local leaders are willing to examine the concepts, theories and frameworks inherent in the research, and then to apply them — carefully tailored to fit state and local circumstances — schools will surely be on the road to becoming more effective. The research does not promise "overnight cures"; it only offers some grounds for optimism.

These exciting research findings paint the following picture of conditions for more effective schooling:

Effective Teaching Practices

Teachers using effective instructional practices systematically present new information, provide opportunities for teacher-supervised as well as independent practice by students, provide frequent feedback, provide periodic review of content already taught and make sure that students are working at appropriate levels of difficulty. While many good teachers have employed these practices for years, research findings suggest that many other teachers do not.

Conclusions being drawn from the research show that, first, these instructional practices need to be carefully structured, sequenced and paced in actual classroom use. It is important, especially for slow learners, that this instruction proceed in rapid, small steps, include detailed explanations and allow for frequent practice until high levels of mastery are achieved and sustained. This contrasts with other approaches that place more emphasis on discovery or independent experiential learning.

Second, these instructional practices need to be accompanied by effective *classroom management practices*, to produce a learning environment that is business-like, relatively free from noise and disruption and that provides for more student time-on-task. Teachers should establish a systematic approach to classroom management by clearly telling students what kind of behavior they expect and explaining the procedures and routines for classroom activities during the *first two*

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weeks of the school year. Again, these classroom management practices are not new; they have been employed by good teachers for a long time. But research findings reveal that not *all* teachers are such effective classroom managers. For example, estimates of student time-on-task vary from a low of 30 percent in some classrooms to a high of 85 or 90 percent in others, a range largely attributable to differences in classroom management practices.

Third, providing effective instruction and classroom management practices requires teachers to plan and make interrelated decisions about the goals, content, materials and activities of instruction. These "scripts" are plans of action to maintain an orderly flow in classrooms with minimum disruptions and management problems. This description of how successful teachers plan contrasts with the techniques offered in preservice education, which limit teachers' attention to a narrow range of objectives, learner-skill levels and learning activities. This suggests a mismatch between preservice training and the more complex demands of actual classroom instruction.

Instructional Management

Student achievement is improved when instructional practices and curriculum are well articulated and adequately reflected in every classroom in the school. Such coordination is especially important in schools where students are pulled out of regular classes for remedial instruction or other special programs, because these students often have the most trouble learning classroom participation rules and are therefore in greater jeopardy if they have to move from setting to setting.

School effectiveness is improved when there is considerable overlap between the content of instruction and the content of tests used to assess student performance. This requires a careful match between textbooks, other instructional materials and the actual items on tests. Available evidence, however, indicates that often there is as little as 50 percent overlap between instructional materials and test items. As a result, school effectiveness is underestimated.

Research results increasingly suggest, too, that good instruction management requires active participation by the building principal. (See *Schools Can Be Improved*, page 1.) While virtually all principals agree that they should be primarily instructional leaders, few report that they spend much time at it. Rather, much of their time is taken by administrative and other noninstructional matters. Additionally, available evidence suggests that current practices for training, certifying and selecting principals, as well as school district practices for evaluating and rewarding them and supporting them in their work, typically do not offer support and motivation toward good instructional leadership.

Shared Values and Culture

Effectiveness in schools also depends, according to research evidence, on values, norms and relationships — in short, the culture that characterizes schools. Improving schools entails changes in peoples' behavior, attitudes, roles and relationships and in the schools' norms that govern people's behavior and work. The findings suggest that effective schools generate a strong sense of community, with common goals and high expectations for student and staff performance and with mechanisms for sustaining common motivation, commitment and identification with school goals.

Two work norms among faculty are especially important: collegiality, or shared work, and continuous improvement during teachers' careers. These norms are instilled in schools through continuous analysis, evaluation and experimentation with instructional practices by teachers working *together*, not in the isolation of individual classrooms. The likely result is the development of shared values and commitment.

Norms and interactions among students are also powerful determinants of school effectiveness. Peer groups provide important role models and informal rewards for students, and often shape and influence individual students'

beliefs about the importance of school work, as well as influence the extent to which students commit time and energy to academic work. Further, peers are capable, under certain circumstances, of providing tutoring and other forms of help to their classmates. There is growing evidence that peer-group norms and interractions in schools are, in part, responses to the structure and climate of the school and classroom, as these are shaped by the behavior and practices of teachers and administrators. For example, research findings indicate that various school practices for grading and evaluating student performance can influence academic norms and the frequency with which students help each other on academic tasks.

Finally, the symbolic aspects of school life appear to be important, largely because they visibly reflect the values embedded in the school culture. Therefore, schools that make it a point officially and publically to recognize academic achievement and stress its importance through the appropriate use of symbols, ceremonies and the like are likely to encourage students to adopt similar norms and values.

External Support

Limited and mixed evidence suggests that school effectiveness can be enhanced by strong support from the superintendent, central office staff and parents. District support appears important in terms of leadership and guidance, technical assistance and help, provision of sufficient resources and the creation of a stable, supportive environment that limits intrusions into the work and culture of the school.

Parents need to be informed of school goals and responsibilities, especially with regard to homework. And they need to be informed of ways in which they can most productively help their own child in school work and learning activities.

Careful Judgment Needed

While the findings offer an optimistic view of the knowledge base for improving school effectiveness, there are limitations as well as strengths in the research. American education is often characterized by fads and reform efforts that rapidly gain popularity, and almost as rapidly are discarded after they fail to live up to the often overblown promises that accompany them. In order to avoid this all too common experience, a balanced view of the research and an appreciation of its potential role are important. The strengths of the research are considerable. They derive essentially from the fact that numbers of reasonably carefully designed and conducted studies, on a series of interrelated and important topics, have produced findings that are convergent, consistent with the best of conventional wisdom and the experience of educators and point in similar directions for school improvement. The limitations are also important to bear in mind, particularly the following:

- Nearly all of the research has been conducted in elementary schools, and only on instruction in basic reading and math skills. With the exception of a few studies, the research base on effective junior or senior high schools is extremely limited.
- The research on effective teaching practices highlights pedagogical and classroom management practices as prerequisites to good teaching, while not at all addressing the levels of teacher subject-matter expertise required. This picture is likely to change, however, as we become concerned with other subject areas (e.g., science, computer literacy) and higher grade levels.
- Most of the studies drawn upon are correlational in nature — they document an association between certain schooling practices and student learning, but do not demonstrate causality. Those experimental studies that do provide evidence for strong causal inferences almost always rely on volunteer teachers who are generally interested in improving their skills and are open to suggestions for change. Strategies for improving the skills of less willing teachers have not yet been clearly identified.
- *Finally, the research findings do not, and will not, provide a simple checklist of what a school should do in order to become more effective.* Rather, they begin to provide sophisticated concepts, frameworks and theories that explain how, why and under what circumstances certain educational practices are more effective than others. Such frameworks are important because schools and classrooms are highly complex, dynamic social systems whose features will influence the implementation and use of any instructional or management strategies identified as effective. Additionally, because particular local circumstances will vary from district to district, school to school and classroom to classroom, the successful applications of findings will depend, in part, on our ability to make sensible interpretations of such findings — interpretations that highlight relevant features of effective practices and of local conditions, and that aid in the development of policies and strategies likely to improve local practice.★

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